“A better understanding of the research nurse role is needed”

Research nursing is not well understood and often confused with the work of nurse researchers. The difference is that research nurses organise and deliver clinical trials and studies for all health professionals, adding to our evidence base and influencing how we care for our patients, whereas nurse researchers design studies relating to nursing activities or interventions. Research nursing raises the bar in nursing by using critical thinking skills, protocol adherence, data accuracy, adverse event alerting, and the accompanying diligence to care and detail. In the patient pathway it is similar to the role of clinical nurse specialists – yet still ignored.

We must articulate the characteristics of the research nursing care patients receive so it can be woven into all nursing practice and cease being perceived as an “easy desk job”. Progress requires evidence so without research nurses, patients would not get better treatments. Herceptin is now used as a primary treatment in breast cancer – this would not be so if studies had not recruited patients to show outcome improvements.

Better understanding of research nurses’ knowledge, skills and values is urgently needed. These nurses make a positive difference – studies show patients fare better in hospitals that participate in research than in those that do not. This is not necessarily because of treatments received but because they are part of the research process. Clinical areas gain from the positive atmosphere and protocol-driven working a dynamic research team can create.

The principles involved in research nursing, rather than just managing studies, are what make the difference. Nurse education must use research nurses as mentors, builders of evidence, able to question the status quo in care and treatments, and experts in consent who are meticulous and accurate leading to improved patient safety. This will ensure all nurses have the right skills to join in research delivery. Training has been developed to improve and standardise nurses’ research skills and all nurses should be encouraged to do this and make research placements more relevant.

Research nurses are vital to successful research delivery, but often invisible and ignored during protocol development and study design. They are rarely acknowledged as contributors in publications, let alone included as authors. Yet when there is no capacity to deliver research, studies falter at the starting line. This operational understanding is a skill that is not valued in the same way as academic expertise.

The powerful research nurse culture and way of working would permeate everyday nursing practice faster if research nurses linked more with clinical and academic nurses. Research must not sit in an ivory tower – our job is to mobilise this element of our workforce. We need to create training tracks so aspiring nurses and those wanting a career change can get on board, unleash their talents for the people we care for and promote the nursing profession.

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